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Mercury, What Every Citizen Should Know

Illinois Environmental Protection Agency

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The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency is committed to reducing the serious adverse effects of mercury contamination on Illinois' natural resources. This brochure provides information on ways to reduce mercury use, which can reduce or eliminate mercury exposure to our environment.

John Cipriani, Director
Illinois Environmental Protection Agency

What is Mercury?

Mercury is a naturally occurring element that does not break down at room temperature. It is a silver-colored liquid. As elemental mercury or methyl mercury, it can be a human health risk.

Why is Mercury a problem?

Because the toxic, silver-colored liquid elemental mercury can be converted naturally to children's methyl mercury.

The most likely source of methyl mercury contamination in humans is from eating contaminated fish. Methyl mercury is very harmful and exposure can result in damage to the nervous system, physical system, or a developing fetus.

Minimizing environmental mercury discharged to land, air and water is an important means of reducing human exposure to mercury. By participating in this process, getting mercury-containing products out of the personal environment, mercury exposure received by children is the focus."

Source: The Council for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Where is Mercury found?

While some mercury compounds might be found in household lights, fluorescent lamps, and other household items.

Mercury can be released into the air when coal is burned as fuel without proper controls or when mercury-containing products are burned. Mercury vapors contaminate soils and water when they combine with rain or snow and are deposited.

Mercury can also be deposited in water by direct discharge of mercury in industrial waste or municipal sewage. Once in water bodies, mercury accumulates in predator fish and can ultimately reach the dinner table.

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources publishes an annual Fish Consumption Advisory. The advisory provides guidelines on how often fish from certain lakes and rivers can be safely eaten. For more information, or to obtain a copy of the Fish Advisory, call the Office of Land Management and Education at: 217-782-6302 or visit the web site at: www.dnr.state.il.us/fish/2002/40.pdf

How do we eliminate Mercury?

Reducing the use of mercury containing products and properly disposing of mercury containing waste can help minimize mercury contamination in Illinois.

Household Hazardous Waste Collections

Take mercury-containing products you already own to a household hazardous waste collection facility. A schedule of these collections can be found at:

www.epa.state.il.us/land/hazardous-waste/household-haz-waste/hhwc-schedule.html

Or contact your local Solid Waste Management Agency. Local governments may also sponsor household hazardous waste collections.

Additional information on mercury thermometer collections or the hazards of mercury can be obtained from the Illinois EPA Office of Pollution Prevention at: 217-782-6700.

At-Home Products

Check for leaks in mercury-containing products, such as fluorescent lightbulbs and thermostats for home use only.

For information on obtaining a contract Illinois Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Pollution Prevention:

1-800-352-3762

Prevention Programs

The "Mercury Spill Kit" at school recycles its used mercury. Spill kits are located in the powder inside a spill kit and contain a spill kit program at your school.

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Spilled mercury

Mercury is a toxic substance. It is found in typical mercury

1. If you spill mercury, do not touch it from the spill area.
2. Turn off the air conditioning to minimize the spread of mercury.
3. If you spill mercury, do not open windows, if possible, to prevent the spread of mercury.
4. If you spill mercury, do not use gloves, preferably, to avoid contact with mercury.
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Handling Spilled Mercury Stx

- On a hard surface or tightly woven fabric use stiff paper to push the beads of mercury together. Use an eyedropper to suction the beads of mercury on, working over a tray to catch any spills, lift the mercury with the paper, and then carefully place the mercury in a wide mouth container. Pick up any remaining beads of mercury with sticky tape and place contaminated tape in a plastic bag along with any tools used for clean up. They should be considered contaminated and disposed of with the mercury. Put the bag in a second bag and label it as mercury waste.
- Use a flashlight to locate all the mercury. The light will reflect off the mercury beads and help them easier to find.
- Cut out mercury-contaminated sections of carpet or rug. The cutout section, along with all cleanup items, should be placed in a plastic bag labeled as mercury waste.
- In water, mercury will sink to the bottom. Remove as much water as possible without disturbing the mercury, and recover the mercury with an eyedropper. Place in a wide mouth container, close and seal with tape, and label as mercury waste. In a drain mercury will be caught in your sink trap. Working over a fire, remove the trap and pour the contents into a large mouth container, seal and label as above.

Large Spills

For directions on how to clean spills of large quantities of mercury (more than 8 tablespoons), and a guide to the possible health effects from mercury exposure contact the Illinois Department of Public Health at: 217-785-6191.

Important Telephone Numbers:

National Response Center

1-800-424-8809

Illinois Environmental Protection Agency

Waste Reduction Unit

217-785-8604



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